

Tears from the void, theatre as therapy.

A conversation with self, about a night at the theatre.

Tao of Glass

Cemil Egeli

- I recently experienced a production of ***Tao of Glass*** as part of the 2019 Manchester International Festival performed at the Royal Exchange Theatre (1). I want to share my experience with you as I think it has a direct relevance to counselling and psychotherapy.

-Can you give me a little background information?

It was a collaboration between the composer Philip Glass and writer, co-director and performer Phelim McDermott. Phelim told a mix of stories which were accompanied by the music of Philip Glass. Many of the stories really resonated with me and I would describe them perhaps as a form of evocative performance autoethnography (2). The stories included accounts of his own admiration of Philip Glass, his growing up as a young boy in Manchester, and a project in which he and Philip Glass along with the author Maurice Sendak, were to put together a production of "In the Night Kitchen" (3). Unfortunately this had to be cancelled due to Maurice's death.

- Sounds a bit fragmented?

-It was, but also connected. It was underpinned by Taoist ideas and the philosophy of Lao Tzu (4) and the psychoanalytical work of Amy and Arnold Mindell (5). The Mindells talk of *process work* or *process orientated psychology* and explore what they call different dimensions of experience which operate within groups and individuals. These dimensions exist on three levels which they describe as consensus reality, dreaming and existence. They also suggest that non-ordinary consciousness can help us to communicate with people in near death states (6).

-Sounds mystical?

- I simply wanted to hear the music of Philip Glass as I have admired it for a long time. I was a school music teacher for years and taught many students about his music. I find the cyclical patterns and structures emancipating as they seem to challenge the more linear and perhaps western hierarchies of melody and accompaniment. I also liked the fact Philip practiced the Chinese exercise called Qigong, as it is something I have had an interest in for years. I saw him practicing it on a documentary and it seemed to make sense, the music fit

with this philosophy. Here was a performance piece embodying these ideas, plus incorporating psychotherapeutic ideas.

- *So what happened at **Tao of Glass**?*

- It was a powerful piece and I have a sense of what made it so for me. It was a combination of all the factors, the music, staging, direction, stories, puppets but something else too...something bigger.

- *A synergy?*

- Of sorts, it was transcendent. There was a puppet boy featured in it. I personally identified with the boy puppet but perhaps he represented my sons too. I felt love for the puppet; a deep affectionate love.

-*You loved a puppet?*

- A projective process I think. There were many moments of puppetry, choreography and screened projections with music which I think helped invoke a dream or altered state.

- *Or trance?*

- Perhaps. Every so often Phelim would break the trance in a Brechtian way (7) – with lighting, humour or the slamming of a piano lid for instance. Brecht wanted to keep the audience awake and objectively aware, but in this case, rather than fully awakening me from it – it served to take the trance deeper.

- *Perhaps more in line with Artaud's ideas on theatre? (8)*

- It certainly was emotive, but I think a mix of theatrical ideas were being worked. I can only compare it to being woken from a deep sleep, but to then re-enter the sleep state in a re-awakened way.

- *An active dream?*

- Layered and lucid dreaming, but with awareness. The choreography of the set was an active participant in this too. The set circles formed a cone effect, a physical representation of the Mindell model. As it rose above the audience it effectively sunk me to perhaps what Mindell may call the essence. I was taken to the depths. It felt physical and embodied. Mindell (9) talks of the dreambody and this to me resonates with the felt sense of Gendlin (10). I was feeling something.

- *Sounds psychodynamic, theatrical psychotherapy...*

- It played with consciousness and my idea of what consensus reality may be. There was a constant oscillation of perceptions and positionality of the character(s) which was uprooting

and served to facilitate a dreamy space. The rotating stage and the use of paper to depict ghosts were mesmerising,

- *Ghosts...*

- There were ghosts, and Philip Glass was there as a ghostly presence throughout. Towards the end, Phelim lay down in what looked like a yogic death pose next to a playerless Steinway piano which had been programmed by Glass himself. Glass had composed it in order to connect with a coma-like state of McDermott. It was eerie but had a beauty to it.

- *Sounds as if the ghost of Glass was playing*

- It took me straight to the death of my younger 29 year old brother and reminded me of the last few days before his passing. It left me with the hope that we had still communicated, despite his sedation. Music had played its part in my brother's own journey to death. He used it to communicate with us.

- *In what way?*

He was very ill with a brain tumour and somehow discussing it with him at the time was difficult. He simply wanted to hold onto hope until the very end. When he had his final prognosis we didn't talk about it too much, but we listened to music, all kinds of music from hip-hop to film soundtracks. It was an expression, a communication. He seemed to use listening to music, both to escape his situation and to be with it, and also maybe to prepare for the next chapter. I remember calling the hospital in his last week, a few days before he slipped away. I could hear him singing to one of his favourite tracks in the background.

During the performance I was feeling a deep loss but yet somehow held by the space. The fact that it was performed in the round was important in containing the energy. Almost like the energy of the therapeutic encounter. The musicians, puppeteers and crew all seemed grounded, serene and moved smoothly around the set, it helped create the conditions for this process to happen.

I felt a gradual sense of personal deconstruction throughout. At one point a piano was physically taken apart and I felt myself taken apart too. There was a story of a glass coffee table being smashed which was strong. I experienced it as metaphor. I felt myself being fragmented into small pieces,

- *You had been shattered,*

- Maybe, but for me there was also the hope of coming together stronger. The Japanese art of Kintsugi was a theme. The idea suggests pieces of a broken pot become more beautiful after having being stuck together with golden glue.

- *What a wonderful metaphor, could even be used for therapy,.*

- I just needed some golden glue to put myself together. A model of Philip Glass's head was used on stage during the deconstruction which was projected on a rotating paper screen. It was tough for me to process. It reminded me of a violent image of John the Baptist that used to spook me when I was young. It was in a children's picture Bible. When Philip Glass appeared in person at the end, there was a collective gasp of exhilaration.

-In what way?

- It was as if he was Lazarus, back from the dead. There he was – Philip Glass – the years of teaching his music – the admiration from afar. Excitement and disbelief. Broken and shattered. The child in me was jumping for joy – it's him. It's really him! Look! It's Philip Glass! With his head on!

I think a version of my inner child came to the fore, adult logic was suspended. I was a child in the room and as Les Todres may say this opened me up to the magic, wonder and healing power of this (11). When Philip played the music, my tears came up and out from inside my body.

- Your heart chakra?

- I could certainly feel it in my chest. It was physical and embodied, my heart was being wrenched. I wasn't sure how much I could take. This very present fleeting moment would only be experienced right here and now. It had a magnitude to it yet temporal brevity and an impending loss. The minimalist musical motif mantras, with the gentle gyroscopic movements of the floating set, had an overpowering beauty to them. There was a perfect integration of the art forms which was almost way too much to process at that time – overwhelming perfection. I couldn't look, I averted my eyes and sobbed, primal tears coming from a place of void. Perhaps it was grief, a personal catharsis. I had to sit for a while in the theatre afterwards. An experience of what Natalie Rogers (12) could call Ecstasy and agony.

It reminded me of a time when I had experienced something comparable in an experiential process group. An eruption of tears. This theatrical experience was a group process, developmental and therapeutic.

- What Maslow may call a peak experience perhaps? (13)

- I had a sense we had collectively entered the dream space with Philip Glass – this was a huge privilege, to be in that creative place. To be there, to be invited to actively witness and even partake in that creation in that moment. There was a truth to the here and now. Glass in his memoir (14) talks of direct experiences and encounters with the transcendent. For me this correlates with William Braud and Rosemarie Anderson (15) who talk about direct knowing or merging with the focus or object of your attention. They compare it to yogic

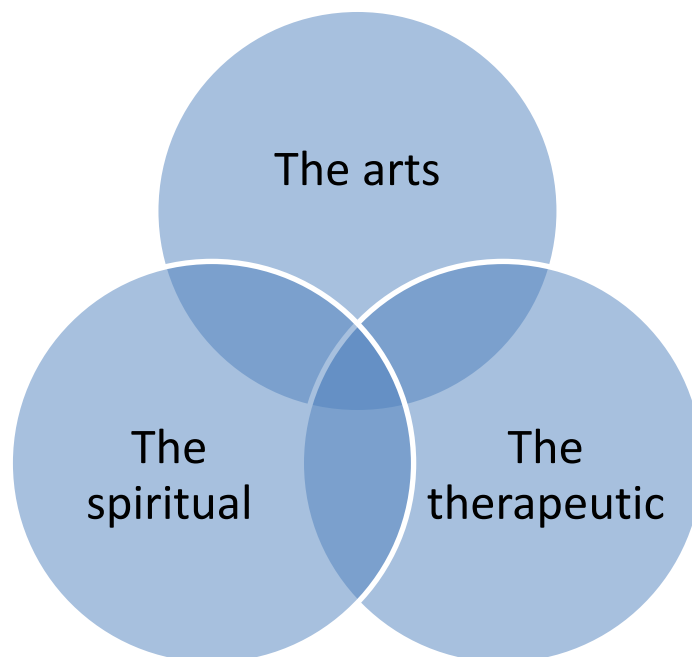
ideas of samyama or complete absorption. I came out saying, “It got me”. It felt profoundly spiritual, whatever which way I look at it.

- *What do you mean by spiritual?*

- Well it can mean many things. Perhaps as William West suggests it could be about human experiencing, connection to others, the universe or non-ordinary consciousness (16). Maybe it is what Dori Yusef may call embodied spirituality (17) or as Natalie Rogers explores (18) spirituality can involve sense of letting go and the collective unconscious. It was rich in symbols and in a Jungian sense was as Philip Goss may suggest, littered with archetypal and unconscious influences (19). It seemed to help release repressed material from the unconscious. Natalie Rogers says, “Reawakening our creativity leads to the spiritual path (20)”. Frances Vaughan in a similar vein suggests creativity is attributed to divine inspiration and tapping into this creativity (including dreams) is a form of listening to self (21).

- *William West (22) also argues that there are tensions with spirituality and therapy. It can still be something of a taboo. I wonder if the arts could offer a creative bridge between these realms as they do seem to overlap? The creativity for me not just being in the making of art but in the active experiencing of it too.*

- There seems to be an interrelation of what could be called the three domains of the arts, the spiritual and the therapeutic. They can all borrow from and occupy each other at the same time. This diagram helps to illustrate this.



- I would suggest therapy can be a creative or artistic act in itself and also spiritual. Spiritual pursuits can involve the arts and be therapeutic. The arts can be both therapeutic and spiritual. Tao of Glass seemed to connect all this together for you?

- I can only reflect on what I experienced in that production at that time. It was a profound moment of connection through the senses yet seemed to transcend them and it felt authentic. The arts are so important and can hold the key to transcendent ways of knowing and experiencing, that's a reality for me. I have often had clients talk of a book they have read, a film they have seen or a piece of music that has impacted them. There are times when I have listened to music with clients. In my experience Therapy does not necessarily need to be artistically creative in itself, but it can also draw on experiences of the arts which then may or may not connect to the spiritual.

This piece of theatre contained many direct references to psychodynamic or therapeutic thinking. It was personally developmental and spiritual. It facilitated these ideas through the fusion of the arts. Brecht talked of breaking the fourth wall, I felt this production broke the fourth dimension and more.

Cemil Egeli

cemilegeli@hotmail.com

I am a counsellor and programme leader for the counselling skills BA (Combined honours) at the University of Chester.

I previously worked as a secondary school music teacher. I have a passion for the arts and many years ago I was a researcher for the South Bank Show (ITV).

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